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There is no such thing as human objectivity. The very action of comprehension converts observation into subjective reality. Without the human capacity to contextualize, nothing could be made sense of. But this then poses the problem of how people can access the truth and the reality of any given situation. What is often misunderstood is that documentation does not aim to uncover any such ultimate reality but rather, with a regulated strategy, researches and presents relevant and ethically fair

interpretations. The approval of such tempered subjectivity is nowhere more evident than in the work of Pete Muller. The American multimedia freelancer is internationally acclaimed as a reporter with “an individual approach to storytelling, one that combines a distinctive aesthetic with journalistic integrity” (TIME).

Since 2005, Muller has worked “to document the individual consequences of war, poverty and social unrest” (Muller). He has worked in the Palestinian territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip; he has covered socio-political issues in

Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, northern Uganda eastern Congo and South Africa as well as domestic issues in the United States. He has worked with Magnum and his work has been used by the likes of the Associated Press (AP), Al Jazeera, Amnesty International, Foreign Policy Magazine, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, Le Monde, National Geographic Channel INTL, The New York Times, Norwegian People's Aid, UNICEF, the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal. He is not shy about his unconventional method of documentation, which is beautiful, powerful and evocative.

In his personal statement, Muller says, “I am not an objective person. I record what I see and makes sense to me.”

photo: Pete Muller petemullerphotography.com

The Oxford Dictionaries define objective adjectively as “not dependent on the mind for existence; actual”. In contrast, subjective is defined as “based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes, or opinions”. This offers a basis to conceptualize a dilemma in human perception. People are subjective beings. In order to make sense of the world, each individual

perceives and internalizes their observations, interpreting based on their own background and knowledge. Everything is contextualized in relation to her or himself. The question is raised on whether, if human beings are so reliant on subjective perception, there are any reality or ultimately valid facts. This conundrum has been explored and explained through two strains of philosophy: that of metaphysics and epistemology. “In metaphysics, something exists objectively if its existence does not depend on its being experienced” (LaFave). This is the standard expectation of

objectivity. Such metaphysic objectivity can be verified if it is in a public forum to be corroborated by several individual experiences. Those personal perceptions fall into the realm of metaphysic subjectivity that applies “if its existence depends on its being experienced” (LaFave). This is the reality that photographs can contain. Photos “really are experience captured and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood” (Sontag 4).

Experience is what personifies Muller’s work. Each image is an experience in itself. Many have

failed where Muller succeeds in documenting situations because he has immersed himself within the community that suffers the event. “Santiago Lyon, AP’s director of photography says Muller’s work showcases “a distinctiveness of voice combined with a fairly unique access” (TIME). Muller does not visit a location for a short documentary stint. Not only that, but Muller has a specific goal of focusing on the individual. He moves to where he feels a message needs to be made. Most all of Muller’s photographs have at least one discernible, identifiable person. There are very few wide-

angle shots within his portfolio. This is a conscious effort on his part to humanize the situations rather than give a large impartial view of what transpires. In his worlds, “Through a combination of photography text, audio and video recordings, I aim to illustrate broader issues through individual stories.” These individuals are presented on a personal level where the camera connects subjective realities, that of the subject, the photographer and the viewer. The camera is very much the extension of the human eye and everything that transpires behind it.

There is a tendency to inconsolably separate subjective and objective as “logical opposites in the strongest sense: they are negations or contradictories of each other” (LaFave). This however is not the case. Metaphysical subjectivity is just as much a part of reality as objectivity. There is an entire portion of reality that is depended on being experienced. Thus subjectivity is in fact “a way of being real” (LaFave). Nonetheless, “[r]eality and truth differ for everyone, and always will” (LaFave). In this sense there is no objective reality or objective

truth. Human beings simply cannot be objective.

Lt. Gen. James Wani Igga being sworn in for his second term as Speaker of the South Sudan Legislative Assembly (AP Photo/Pete Muller)

It might be observed that mechanical recording of an event through film, photography and audio recording can sidestep such perception. A machine would hypothetically remove any human interpretation and subjectivity because “a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected

by objects) – a material vestige of its subject” (Sontag 153). Conceivably, this indicates that a metaphysical objectivity is obtained. “However carefully the photographer intervenes in setting up and guiding the image-making process, the process itself remains an optical-chemical (or electronic) one, the workings of which are automatic, the machinery for which will inevitably be modified to provide still more detailed and, therefore, more useful maps of the real” (Sontag 158).

There is a divergence in this speculation that goes into two possible scenarios: that in which

the photograph is completely isolated as an idea and the photograph in its inevitable contextual surroundings. After all, “dependence on a machine did not prevent it from being a fine art” (Sontag 125), which if nothing else is an indication of its overall subjectivity. The fact that there is a guiding force behind the camera negates any misconceived notion of mechanical objectivity. The photograph is in its entirety a creation of subjective man. “In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their

subjects” (Sontag 5). There many variables and choices leading up the photograph are all subjective decisions based on an individual. The subjectivity of the documentation does not stop there either. The photograph is not taken to be hidden away it is meant to be viewed and there continues the interpretation. “To photograph is to confer importance” (Sontag 28). The subject has been singled out and demands to be viewed. This engagement of the viewer is by no means a passive, objective observation but an aggressive subjectivity. The photographer is aware of the “tendency inherent in

all photographs to accord value to their subjects” (Sontag 28) and uses it to her or his advantage. Muller is one such instrumental reporter. “I strive to create images and material that demand consideration for the lives of those depicted” (Muller). He has no pretensions about the ingrained influence a photograph has. Rather than clinging to an illusion of objective reality, Muller embraces the offensive subjectivity as an effective tool in communicating important information.

What has been refuted already is the misinformed notion of the “naively empirical view of the

world, a belief in the separation of facts and values, a belief in the existence of a reality – the reality of empirical facts" (Kieran 23). It has been contested and substantiated that a "photograph depends upon the conceptual context and framework it is placed within" (Kieran 26). It is at the same time an art form and a trusted source of information. This duality is precarious but not impossible to balance. Although any documentarian must be aware of the consequent conclusion that must be drawn from the evidence: that "the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the

usually shady commerce between art and truth” (Sontag 5).

The truth of any situation is minimal at best. Outside of a finite set of minimal truths is the interpretation of the observer. For documentation, “certain low-level descriptions of what the photograph is of are true” (Kieran 25). In a world of subjective reality any truth is hard to legitimize. Epistemology addresses issues about validity of truth claims in objective and subjective terms. Observations within a metaphysical context can be “epistemologically objective if its truth value can be determined intersubjectively by

generally-agreed methods or procedures” (LaFave). To discern whether or not a report is accurately discussing an event, investigators can compare findings and agree the facts that overlap are true. “Obviously events are significantly independent of us, so certain low-level descriptions are true of them” (Kieran 26). But it is pointed out in media ethics that “how we should interpret the image or event, and construe its significance, depends upon the categories, interpretative framework and evaluate commitments we bring to bear upon it” (Kieran 26). All events are

open to countless interpretations just as no two photographs of the same subject are actually the same.

This brings into critical light what documentary work actually aims at and if the widely assumed objectivity of a photograph is valid at all. Journalism is instrumental in any medium of documentation and there is a “supposed duty, to impartiality and objectivity” (Kieran 23) ascribed to any journalist. What is misunderstood is that the goal of reporting is not to uncover some incontestable objective reality, this is an impossibility, regardless of how many sources or years worth

of investigation a journalist might have. Instead on a more realistic mission, “journalists generally are not so much after the rational assessment and report of a story but, rather, different ways of interpreting and evaluating the same event in ways in which the relevant audience will find appropriate” (Kieran 26).

To this end, perspectives and variations within an approach to one single story is nearly limitless. It depends on the goal of the documentation. In a photographer’s case, such as Muller’s, “the photograph is, always, an object in a context

which shapes whatever immediate – in particular, political – uses the photograph may have is inevitably succeeded by contexts in which such uses are weakened and become progressively less relevant" (Sontag 105). Muller's photography is painfully relevant to his decided contexts. This is not to say that these subjective images undermine the reality of the situation. Muller is a perfect example of the intersection of objective and subjective that seems so outlandish in their traditional definitions.

In 2011, TIME Magazine named Muller the "Wire Photographer of

the Year” for his work in the Associated Press. It praised Muller’s balance between “the AP’s desire for news with a personal passion for more in-depth story telling” (TIME). This year, in April, Muller was awarded the John Faber Award for Best Photographic Reporting for a Newspaper or News Wire by the Overseas Press Club of America. The 2011 Chinese International Press Photo Contest gave him an honorable mention in war and disaster stories. In 2009, he was nominated for best online journalism article in the 21st Annual Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation media awards.

Muller’s acclaim is evidence that his more personal approach is finding support from the within the media agencies. There is indication that the organizations “want photographers to have a voice and as long as that voice is journalistically sound and is as objective or impartial as it needs to be meet AP standards for fairness and accuracy” (TIME). Muller’s photographs bring his stories more attention through his creative process, which balance a unique vision and aesthetic with journalistic integrity.

In light of the shift in “photographic realism [which] can be – is more

and more – denned not as what is ‘really’ there but as what I ‘really’ perceive” (Sontag 120), Muller’s documentary work is indicative of the new turn in journalism. While “[p]hotographs cannot create a moral position, […] they can reinforce one – and can help build a nascent one” (Sontag 17) through metaphysically subjective but epistemologically objective interpretations of reality. “A photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude” (Sontag 16). Because the

effectiveness of a photograph is directly contingent on the context it is put in, the objective of documentary work is not to be objective. Passive objectivity would rob a photograph of any information it might be able to provide or even promote a omission of the report altogether. Documentary work actively engages viewers, declares importance and embraces subjectivity as a piece in the whole of conceivable reality.

Photograph of a Sudanese cattle raider (photo: Pete Muller petemullerphotography.com)

“The conflict of interest between objectivity and subjectivity, between demonstration and supposition, is unresolvable. While the authority of a photograph will always depend on the relation to a subject (that it is a photograph of something), all claims on behalf of photography as art must emphasize the subjectivity of seeing” (Sontag 135). It is ignorant to deny the artistic character of a photograph. It is the journalist’s responsibility to fairly report their interpretation, not taking for granted the plethora of worldviews involved but acting as a mediator. Documentaries assume the role of

diligent filters and consolidators. From a wide range of subjectivities, investigators obtain a more comprehensive view and interpretation of the reality of events. As subjective beings, and as long as humans document, there can be no objective documentation. The fairness of any report is dependent solely on the meticulous ethical standards set down in media. There has been a growing support of the more genuine reporting like Pete Muller who does not deny the interplay between the objective and subjective.

The objective cannot portray a complete picture of the reality of a situation. There is a whole realm of metaphysical subjectivities that cannot be passively perceived but are nonetheless there. For example, “[i]n the normal rhetoric of the photographic portrait, facing the camera signifies solemnity, frankness, the disclosure of the subject’s essence” (Sontag 37). It cannot go without note that many of Muller’s photographs are portraits in a certain sense or other. In his photo story *Battling Impunity: Rape Trials in Eastern Congo – The Victims*, he assembled a collection of portraits of the

women. But their faces are covered. Without an interpretation, these photographs would not have the effect they achieve – would not have any meaning whatsoever. Muller understands this. As he said, “I believe that intimate, sensitive photographs leave indelible marks on the conscience and actively oppose the sterilization of human suffering.”